

The Goodwill for a Meeting: That's cinema¹

Excerpts by Henri Langlois / Jean-Louis Comolli / Nicholas Ray

Henri Langlois

Silent cinema is the image. And what is the image? It is a diamond. A diamond which men learned to cut, polish and set off to advantage, but which always retains its irreducible nature. The sound film is an alloy. It is a ceramic. How can one fuse these two things ?

[...]

When I lecture, I sometimes take the liberty of cutting off a film's soundtrack. If you do this to *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931), the images become flat; switch it on again, and they regain their tone. This shows that *M* is a true talking picture. Deprived of sound, *The Most Dangerous Game* (Ernest B. Schoedsack and Irving Pichel, 1932) reveals what its soundtrack conceals. You see people whose lips move but whose eyes and faces are expressionless. They are in effect people talking, but saying what? They make a pretence of speaking, they imitate people talking. Do you see what I mean? It was through experimenting like this that I realised Gabin was nothing without sound. Why? Because he wanted to seem natural, and since the stress was laid on the dialogue, the result was naturalism.

There is one man, just one, who succeeded in making a homogeneous whole out of talking

pictures, and he is dead. Vigo. He took sound, image, music and dialogue and merged them –and I mean merged, not mixed. The result was *L'Atalante* (1934). Seeing this film you see why the cinema is dying from a horrible disease: naturalism. By naturalism I mean a servile imitation of reality. No film seems more naturalistic than *L'Atalante*. But only seems: in fact it is a stained glass window.

[...]

The cinema is a means towards the acquisition of knowledge in the manner of St. Thomas: by touch. Read all you like about love, but if you haven't made love your idea of it will be totally false.

Referring to the Méliès exhibition I arranged at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, a film-maker's wife paid me the most wonderful compliment imaginable: 'You guide people into a book which is no book. You have re-created an ambience which enables them, by plunging into it, to under-stand everything through a sort of osmosis.' I would like the Musée du Cinéma to serve the same purpose. I do not believe in education in the form which we call education. True education is osmosis. Latin, mathematics and so on are useful as mental gymnastics, but art is a subject that cannot be taught. It is learned through osmosis.

1. Jean-Luc Godard in: BACHMAN, Gideon (1984). *The Carrots Are Cooked: A Conversation with Jean-Luc Godard*. *Film Quarterly*, vol. 27, n° 3, p.132.

Among the Eskimos, all his games prepare the child for living. He plays, but in fact he is preparing himself for the hunt, for fishing. He imitates his father and gradually, through his play, he learns. This is the opposite of a university education. Whether one likes it or not, moreover, education is still a master of class. Someone whose borne contains an extensive library, or who grows up in artistic surroundings, is enriched even if he rejects the environment which formed him. He is already a step ahead of a poor boy who learns everything he knows at school. Dumas did more for History than all the teachers put together.

For years, all exhibitions have been based on the idiotic system of education by explanation, because people like to learn what they should think. But art cannot be explained, it is felt. If there is to be a bond between art and man, we must re-create umbilical cord. [1]

Jean-Louis Comolli

Does what stated under the name 'cinema' propose a different logic from that of the spectacle at any cost; not the logic of rejection of any spectacular dimension, but rather its rigorous control through the *mise-en-scène*, a writing system, which hides to better show, instead of showing more to 'fill the eyes'? To suppose cinema is an 'art' means only that: an active space for the spectator. The cinematographic gesture do not pretend to merely be in accordance with its time, but to shed lights on it; to make the keys, rather than to drive the short euphoric drunkenness which wants to 'force to forget' the common alienations. In such an old debate, as old as cinema itself, which would be, which should be the place for a film school?

Renounce to cinema? Lessen its relevance? The question is stated. Already from the first

insignia (IDHEC, Institute for Advanced Cinematographic Studies) to the second (La Fémis, European Foundation for Image and Sound Professionals), what disappears is the word 'cinema'². What a pity! Teaching technical professions never fulfilled anyone. Starting from the technicians themselves, who generally are eager to make artistic work or to collaborate with it, and expect issues such as sense, pertinence, historicity, and exemplarity to work strongly, way beyond the issue of the 'craft' to be achieved or transmitted. Craft? What for? Whom for? Whom with? Whom against? Professionalism is not morals, further less a reason of being. Regarding technicians, they are not robots. Gifted with a head to think and a body to feel, they love and desire. Nothing will make them renounce to the aesthetic dimension of cinema to settle for a technological training from which they see, better than anyone else, the final inanity. Once the excitement is over, a terrible absence of thought finds its way.

Learning, therefore, starts from experimenting in the difficult exercise of the artistic practice (to write a film, to stage, to construct, to edit), with its zones of doubts and shadows, the validity of the theoretical and historical facts, which without this practical confrontation would be dead word. Whatever his grounding might be, no filmmaker apprentice stays out of cinema as it has been elaborated until him. To verify that in the practice is to discover his own relationship with one cinematographic family or another. It is as well to understand that filming has nothing –truly– innocent. Is it not within the educational background, protected from blackmailing and immediate profitability, where learning can be centred on what matters: the place of the subject –the student, the technician, the instructor, the artist– in the creation of sense, the sense of a work that will confront society, that will venture into the world? [2]

2. The Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (IDHEC) was founded in 1943 and restructured in 1986 to

become, the Foundation européenne des métiers de l'image et du son (La Fémis).

Nicholas Ray

The cinémathèques, the archives around the world, are the places where you as film buffs, as serious students, as participants in the art of making films, can go to attach yourselves to films, to reject or revolt against other films, or to contradict that process. Thanks to cinémathèques and archives, works that you feel attached to are preserved, so that you can exploit the opportunities they offer for your own artistic growth.

[...]

I would like to help create a new concept of film as a living, continuously breathing thing, so you see the molecules of thought and emotion and experience working all the time, and in a kind of wonderful disorder that permits the audience to participate in creating its own order and drawing their own conclusions from what they experience.

[...]

I long for the day when I can be certain there's a filmmaker in every family, when the form of communication is not limited to the word or the page, when each kid can have a crack at giving a full expression to something of himself.

How much richer the neighborhood would be, just one square block. We should be equipped and surrounded with the materials that creative activity calls for.

[...]

I'm very happy teaching. I love the process of discovery in other people, and when it happens to me I feel I've had a great big gift. And I want to make films, desperately. But not any film. I don't want to make a film that looks like all-weather paint splashed against a barn wall. [3] •

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- [1] Excerpt from 'Entretien avec Henri Langlois', by Rui Nogueira, interview made in 1972, originally published in *Sight and Sound* (Fall, 1972). The French version in *Zoom* (n°25, June-July 1974). Extracted from: LANGLOIS, Henri (1986). *Henri Langlois. Trois cent ans de cinéma. Écrits*. Paris. Cahiers du cinéma, Cinémathèque Française, FEMIS, pp. 96-99.
- [2] Excerpt from 'Should La Fémis Be the School of Conformity?', published in *Libération*, May 31st, 1996. Compiled in: COMOLLI, Jean-Louis (2004). *Voir et*

pouvoir. L'innocence perdue : cinéma, télévision, fiction, documentaire. Paris: Verdier, pp. 347-350. Spanish translation in: COMOLLI, Jean-Louis (2007). *Ver y poder. La inocencia perdida: cine, televisión, ficción, documental*. Buenos Aires. Aurelia Rivera: Nueva Librería, pp. 338-339.

- [3] RAY, Nicholas (1995), *I was interrupted. Nicholas Ray on making movies*. RAY, Susan (ed.). Berkeley and Los Angeles. University of California Press, pp.152-155.